

Yugoslav War

The Yugoslav War is the conflict that occurred among various groups in the Socialist Federated Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) during and after the breakup of that country in the 1990s. The main fighting took place in the republics of CROATIA and BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA.

Background

The SFRY, which existed from 1945 to 1991, was composed of six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Like its predecessors, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-41), and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918-29), it was a multiethnic state in which no one group formed a majority of the population. The largest ethnic group were the Serbs, who accounted for 36 percent in 1991. Other significant groups were the Croats, Muslims, Slovenians, Albanians, Macedonians, and Montenegrins.

The SFRY's Communist power structure, established under the TITO regime, began to come apart in the early 1980s. As the center decayed, however, no new elite or political formation appeared that was capable of uniting the country. Instead, power gravitated more and more to the six constituent republics, and old rivalries reemerged between Serbia on the one hand and Croatia and Slovenia on the other. When non-Communist political parties began to take shape beginning in 1988, they restricted their activity to their own republics. This was true of the parties that emerged in Slovenia and Croatia, and of the League of Communists of Serbia, which, under strongman Slobodan MILOSEVIC, reorganized itself as the Socialist party of Serbia. The same tendency was manifested a bit later in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the latter case with the additional complication that some parties were oriented to Bosnian Muslims, some to Bosnian Serbs, and some to Bosnian Croats.

The weakening of the center accelerated in 1989, and by 1990 the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) was acting more like a Serbian army than anything remotely Yugoslav. Allegedly "unreliable" officers—largely Slovenes and Croats—were retired and replaced by Serbs. The army halted deliveries of weapons to Slovenia and Croatia and confiscated weapons already held by local defense forces in those republics. It also purchased large quantities of weapons from the USSR and transferred them to newly organized (and illegal) Serbian militias in Croatia and Bosnia. These militias were trained by JNA officers.

The last SFRY census showed that 11.6 percent of the population of Croatia were ethnic Serbs; most of the rest were Croats. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was much more mixed—43.8 percent Muslim, 31.5 percent Serb, 17.3 percent Croat, and 7.4 percent other. As Yugoslavia skidded toward interethnic war, Serbs in Croatia started to demand political autonomy; Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina declared that they would never agree to Bosnia's secession from Yugoslavia, no matter what the majority might decide.

War in Croatia. Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence on June 25, 1991. The JNA attacked Slovenia the next day, but after two weeks of fighting a truce was concluded and Slovenia was permitted to secede from the federation. In July, however, the war spread to Croatia.

The Serbian minority in Croatia constituted a strong majority only in the "Knin enclave" in the Dalmatian hinterland. Despite this, Serbian irregulars, backed by the JNA, laid siege to a string of predominantly Croat-inhabited cities, including the Slavonian towns of Osijek and Vinkovci, and the port cities of ZADAR and DUBROVNIK. Equipped with heavy artillery supplied by the JNA, and supported by JNA air cover, they also seized a large number of villages that were exclusively Croat or Magyar. The town of Vukovar, which was captured in November after a lengthy siege, was largely demolished in the fighting. In September the JNA also launched aerial attacks on the Croatian capital city of Zagreb. By the end of 1991, Serbian secessionists had taken control of about 30 percent of the territory of Croatia.

In September 1991 the United Nations Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the Yugoslav republics, and an international peace conference met in the Netherlands under the auspices of the European Community (EC) to seek a resolution of the conflict. Lord Carrington of Great Britain (later replaced by Lord Owen) and Cyrus VANCE of the United States were appointed chief mediators for the EC and the UN, respectively. In January 1992 the Republic of Croatia and the Krajina Republic (the Serbian secessionist government) signed a truce under EC mediation, agreeing to the introduction of a UN peacekeeping force to maintain order on the cease-fire line.

The Bosnian War

During February and March 1992 tensions were rising between Serbs and non-Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At EC urging, the Bosnian government of Alija Izetbegovic (a Muslim) held a republic-wide referendum on independence at the end of February. The Serbs boycotted the referendum, but Muslims and Croats voted overwhelmingly to secede from Yugoslavia. The new Bosnian state was then recognized by the Western European countries and the United States. The Bosnian Serbs, however, rejected the results of the referendum and vowed to resort to arms to prevent separation.

During March international mediators produced a plan to divide Bosnia into more than four dozen ethnic cantons, but this was rejected by all three parties. By the first week of April, Bosnia was clearly at war. Some Muslim and Croat neighborhoods had obtained some light weapons, but they were much less prepared than the Bosnian Serbs, who had received heavy artillery and field guns from the JNA.

During the first few weeks the army of the new Serb-dominated Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) played a direct role in the fighting in Bosnia, both in ground action and aerial bombardment of Muslim and Croatian towns. Later it pulled out its ground forces but continued to provide air support for Bosnian Serb military operations. In a short time the Serbs drove Muslims and Croats out of dozens of villages (a process that became known as "ethnic cleansing") and by the end of 1992 had seized control of 70 percent of the republic's territory. International opinion was shocked by reports of the brutal treatment of refugees by the Serbs.

Beginning in late summer 1992, clashes also began to occur between Muslims and Croats in southwestern Hercegovina; Muslim-Croat fighting in that area continued and intensified in 1993.

In May 1992 the UN and the EC imposed a trade embargo on the FRY, and NATO warships were sent to the Adriatic to enforce it. The UN also began relief flights to bring supplies to the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, which remained under siege by Bosnian Serb forces throughout 1992 and 1993. In October 1992 international mediators proposed the Vance-Owen peace plan and tried to get the three sides (Serbs, Croats, and Muslims) to agree to it. The Croats and Muslims eventually did endorse it, but the Bosnian Serbs rejected it in January 1993 and again in April of that year. The Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, was pressured into accepting the plan, but his acceptance was reversed by his own parliament.

EC-sponsored negotiations continued in Geneva, and in June 1993, under threat of NATO military action against the Serbs, they and the Croats produced a joint plan providing for the partition of Bosnia. In August this proposal was modified by Lord Owen and Thorwald Stoltenberg of Norway (who had succeeded Vance). The Owen-Stoltenberg plan assigned 52 percent of Bosnia's territory to the Serbs, 30 percent to the Muslims, and 18 percent to the Croats. The Izetbegovic government declared it unacceptable. Meanwhile, the situation in Croatia still remained unresolved, and despite the cease-fire sporadic outbreaks of fighting continued to occur between government forces and the Serbian secessionists.

By autumn 1993 some 250,000-300,000 persons had died in the war, and another 3 million were homeless. It had a devastating impact on the economies of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, and much of the infrastructure in Croatia and Bosnia was destroyed. The many atrocities and human rights violations committed during the conflict (including the reported rape of more than 20,000 Muslim women by Serbian soldiers) gave rise to demands that the guilty parties be tried for war crimes.

On Feb. 9, 1994, NATO issued a 10-day ultimatum to the Bosnian Serb forces besieging Sarajevo, declaring that their heavy weapons must be withdrawn 20 km (12 mi) from the city or risk attack by NATO aircraft. The attacks, NATO declared, would be closely coordinated with the United Nations secretary general. The Russian government, which historically has close ties with Serbia, was instrumental in arranging a withdrawal of Serbian heavy weapons before the expiration of the deadline, and additionally sent a contingent of peacekeepers to monitor Serbian compliance. In late February, Bosnian Croats and Muslims signed a cease-fire agreement covering the central and southwestern areas of the Bosnian republic.

Sabrina Petra Ramet

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